STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Incident of attack by terrorists on Tanda Army Cantonment at Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir, on July 22, 2003

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES): Madam Deputy Chairperson, the statement that I am going to present to the House was actually made available to the Secretariat on the 24th of July. But certain circumstances intervened, and I was not called upon to make the statement.

I would like to inform the House about the unfortunate incident of terrorist attack in Tanda Cantonment at Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir on July 22, 2003. I have visited the site in the morning of July 23, 2003.

On July 22, 2003 at about 0550 hours, three terrorists, one in civilian dress and two in combat uniform with *khaki* caps (one was wearing the epaulettes of Pakistan Army Lieutenant and *Janbaz* insignia) disembarked from a civil truck in front of the EME Battalion gate of Tanda Cantonment. The sentry at the gate immediately challenged them and opened fire. One terrorist was killed on the spot, and in the ensuing firefight one sentry was killed and one injured. The other terrorists evaded fire of the sentry and rushed inside the unit lines lobbing grenades and firing indiscriminately. In the process, a total of two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and four Other Ranks (Ors) were killed and two JCOs and four Ors were wounded. The Quick Reaction Team (QRT) of the unit killed the second terrorist.

By 0630 hours, the Quick Reaction Team from neighbouring units were also moved to the location. A detailed search of the area was carried out till 1030 hours. After searching the unit lines and the adjoining area under the supervision of senior officers of local formation, it was assessed that the area had been cleared of the terrorists.

At about 1300 hours, Lt. Gen. Hari Prasad, GOC-in-C, Northern Command, and Lt. Gen. TPS Brar, GOC, 16 Corps along with their staff officers visited the site to review the situation. As these officers were moving in the area, one terrorist emerged from the bushes in a *nala*, which passes through the unit lines and lobbed two grenades on them. ... The

orist later blew himself up. However, seven officers, including GOC-in-C, hern Command, and the Corps Commander received minor injuries due the grenade blasts, except Brig. V.K. Govil, Deputy Director, EME, 16 Corps, who later succumbed to his injuries at 1630 hours.

As a result of the terrorist attack, eight army personnel (one Officer, two JCOs and five ORs) were killed and thirteen (seven Officers, two JCOs and four Other Ranks) were wounded. All the three terrorists were killed, and three AK rifles and three pistols were recovered. The driver of the truck in which the terrorists came has been taken into custody and is being interrogated.

A lesser known militant outfit, 'Al Shuhda Brigade J&K', has claimed responsibility for the attack stating, "the attack on the camp was carried out to protest visiting Pakistani Opposition Leader, Maulana Fazlur Rehman's remarks that the Line of Control should be converted into a permanent border and the Kashmir issue should be resolved within the framework of the Shimla Agreement". The identity of the three terrorists has not yet been established.

I may inform the House that adequate measures have been taken to ensure security of vulnerable areas by way of gathering intelligence inputs, reinforcing the security mechanisms, intensifying patrolling and employing Quick Reaction Teams. In addition to security measures in position, special strategies are being devised to effectively combat terrorist attacks.

I would like to further inform the hon. Members that an investigation into the incident has already been ordered. I would like to assure the House that if the investigation establishes any lapse in the enforcement of security measures by the Army, stringent action will be taken against those found responsible.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN : Shri Shankar Roy Chowdhury.

SHRI SHANKAR ROY CHOWDHURY (West Bengal) : Madam, firstly, there is an issue not connected with the House and the statement that the hon. Defence Minister has made. Our conduct this afternoon has

been observed by a whole lot of school children sitting up there. And we sometimes wonder why people think about us the way they think.

That apart, three major terrorist attacks, at Kaluchak, Tanda and Srinagar, sometime ago, were on units, which are facing the main road. Have we not devised measures for this yet? The terrorist attack, which deserves and requires -- I am sure the Defence Ministry is doing it, the Army is doing it -- far greater investigation than the Tanda attack, is the attack on Sanjuan. And while these things are unfortunate, a conflicting situation is there, these things will happen. There have been a series of such attacks; this is not the first attack; it will not be the last attack either. But I do think that we have to devise a method -- no method can be foolproof -- based on the pattern of attacks, because *fidayeen* attacks are now more or less commonplace. Human bombs will come; they have not yet come, but they will come. We should plan on that. We should urgently devise the details of attacks based on the pattern of such attacks, which are taking place. Three of these attacks are on units, which are facing the road.

I express my condolences for the men who were killed in this attack and the previous attacks. We must not lose heart; these attacks will continue. I am sure, we will find a way to stop these attacks. I read in the media that operations are being intensified. They have to be intensified. The operations in Jammu & Kashmir hold the key to the future of our talks with Pakistan. We have to intensify our operations and we have to ensure that such attacks, while they will occur -- attempts will be made and some will be successful -- are definitely cut down. I understand that the truck driver has been taken into custody. It would be interesting to note where he came from, how these people got along. I wish the defence forces and the Ministry of Defence the best of luck in their efforts.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN : Do you want to seek clarification, Maitreyanji?

DR. V. MAITREYAN (Tamil Nadu) : Yes, Madam. How did the authorities wrongly assess the third terrorist? How did they miss him and declared that area cleared of the terrorists?

SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES : First let me thank Shri Shankar Roy Chowdhury for his observations and assure him that efforts are being made to see as to how one can deal with these fidayeens, to the extent possible. It is very rightly observed that *fidayeen* attack is something which can never be found out before it actually happens. Therefore, the Army and the security forces are at a great disadvantage when they have to deal with the situation where terrorists come loaded with grenades and other explosives with their intention to die. In this process, they also take a few other lives. The hon. Member asked a question as to how the second attack came about. The first attack was in the early hours of morning. After the fire-fighting was over, it became known that there was another person. A search was conducted and units from other centres were also called in and joined the search. This camp is located in a place where there is a very thick forest, right inside the cantonment campus. The length of the forest is about one kilometer on both sides of the tarred road. It is a thick forest with *nalas* and rocks. We can call it a 'jungle'. That particular terrorist was hiding in the bushes in a *nala* and obviously he had camouflaged himself in such a way that nobody could find him out where he was hidden. At 1 O'clock, a signal was given that the entire place had been sanitized and the senior officers might come. At about 1.30 p.m., the senior officers reached there. I have already mentioned their names and designations. They went around to see the area where the action had taken place earlier. When they reached that particular *nala*, the third terrorist jumped out from the place where he was hiding and threw two grenades one after the other. He also blew himself up with grenades that he had tied to his own body. Now, one can make a point that greater care should have been taken by those who were going around, but if one goes to that terrain and has a look at that terrain, one would understand that such a situation, I won't say inevitable, but such a situation is possible. That is my reply to the query. Thank you, Madam.

THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN : Thank you. The time is also exact 5 o'clock. So, we adjourn the House till 11 a.m. tomorrow.

The House then adjourned at five of the clock till eleven of the clock on Wednesday, the 30th July, 2003.

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